

Popular Culture and Royal Propaganda in Norway and Iceland in the 13th century

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One of the main topics of discussion in research on the translated *riddrasögur* has been their intended purpose and function. Earlier research on the subject has suggested that the translations of the European romances were commissioned by King Hákon Hákonarson in order to present a new European royal ideological model to the Scandinavian society. In this article I wish to investigate this hypothesis further by studying the royal ideology in *Strengleikar*. Do the kings presented in *Strengleikar* appear as the European Christian *rex justus* kings, which was the dominant medieval royal model, or do they convey another image – an image that may be interpreted to explain both the intended function and the popularity of the translations in Norway and Iceland?

Introduction

This article will address the theme of royal ideology in the collection of short stories *Strengleikar*, which is the Old Norse translation of the *lais* by the French poet Marie de France. The collection was one of the first examples of European vernacular literature introduced to the Norwegian court, and according to its prologue, translated under the commission of King Hákon Hákonarson. The king commissioned the translations of other romances as well, like for example *Ívens saga*, *Elis saga*, *Möttuls saga*, *Tristrams saga*, as it is written in their prologue/epilogue.

One interesting question that has been discussed by many scholars is why King Hákon commissioned the translations of the *riddarasögur*. The plausible theories are numerous and diverse¹, but in this article, I will relate to only one of them, the hypothesis that King Hákon undertook this cultural enterprise in order to Europeanise his own court and image and, in this way, to legitimate a transformation of his kingship, from a local Norse type to a more European type. The European literature available at the Norwegian court would have served to culturally educate the court members about European manners of behaviour and models of conduct. Further, by having a proper Europeanised court, King Hákon would have appeared as a Euro-

¹ Fidjestøl 1997.

pean Christian monarch, situated on top of the social pyramid by the grace of God, i.e. a proper *rex justus*. Note also that it was first with King Hákon that the European ideal of *rex justus* was fully introduced to the Norwegian cultural context.²

Even though the kingship of Hákon Hákonarson has been pointed out to be more European in its character compared to that of his predecessors, the Norwegian kingdom was never fully ruled by the same social and political structures as the feudal kingships of France or England, where the romances originated. The Norwegian kingship preserved its specific Norse characteristics, due to the kingdom's geography, climate and landscape. It is, therefore, relevant to ask whether and how the *rid-darasögur* related to the local Norse royal ideologies. Could it be that the introduction of the sagas, and their growing popularity, was due not only to the new ideas inherent in them, but also to elements within them, reminiscent of local and established ideologies?

This line of thought may be taken a step further and considered for a larger geographical area. It is well known that during the late 13th and 14th century, the *rid-darasögur* became relatively popular in Iceland as well, inspiring both the production of indigenous romance literature and enriching the oral popular culture with ballads, containing narrative elements from the translated *riddarasögur*. It may be assumed that it was because of their highly entertaining value that the romances became so widely-spread. However, the amusing qualities of the stories did not have to devalue the political message inherent in them, but may have instead contributed to its wider transmission and acceptance. It may, hence, be suggested that the translated romances may have propagated its political message not only at the 13th century Norwegian court, but also among the much broader audience, both socially and geographically, of Iceland. This suggestion becomes even more plausible if the historical situation of the period is taken in consideration. In 1262–64, Iceland became a part of the Norwegian domain (*Norgesveldet*) which at its greatest, in 1265, also included Greenland, The Faroe islands, Shetland, the Orkneys, the Hebrides and Man. With such a changed geographical and political situation, the Norwegian king may have been in need of alternative modes to promote his royal ideology – old, new or mixed – and the translated European literature may have functioned as such a means, on the basis of its entertaining qualities and inherent royal ideology.

Norway and Iceland in the 13th century

In the beginning of the 1200s, Norway was split apart by internal struggles. Peace was gradually established and King Hákon, winning over his rival Skuli, emerged as

² Bagge 1996.

a sole king in 1217 and ruled until his death in 1263. His reign was characterised by internal peace and also, external expansion of the Norwegian borders. In 1262-64, Iceland submitted to the Norwegian kings, even though the country was ruled independently and separately from Norway. Greenland submitted to the Norwegian king as well in 1261, while the Hebrides, the Isle of Man, Shetland and the Orkneys were ceded from Norwegian control in 1266. Bergen, the seat of King Hákon, became gradually one of the most important Scandinavian centres for long-distance trade.³ Bagge points out that such demographic expansion and development of trade led to the strengthening and centralisation of political powers. This process was possibly further supported by the existence of the old military system of *leiðang*. It consisted of compulsory contribution of military and marine assistance from the various costal regions, as well as, a common obligation to host and entertain the king on his travels. The described system gradually developed into a regular tax and also led to the formation of a fulltime *hirð*, as reflected in the *Hirðskrá* from 1273. However, it has been suggested that the group of retainers functioned only in addition, and not as a substitute for the *leiðang*, which remained far more important in Norway, compared to Sweden and Denmark, because of the long Norwegian coastline.⁴

King Hákon's reign may also be characterised by the development of legislation and emergence of public justice, steered by both the Church and the King. The Norwegian provincial laws were revised under Hákon's reign, which culminated with the introduction of a national law in 1274-7 by Hákon's son, King Magnus. Private revenge was also banned by the king in 13th century Norway. This had a considerable consequence for the social structures and interrelationships in Norway. In short, the Norwegian society, which was once mainly steered by the principle of family bonds and personal friendship, gradually transformed to promote interdependence and loyalty to the King.⁵ The royal office became much more institutionalised, and substituted the earlier focus on the king as a person. An official royal unction and coronation, defining the kingship as existing by the grace of God, became a regular custom in Norway from 1247.⁶ Obedience and respect to the king were due by all and the king had to rule indirectly, through his local representatives and various power symbols, like seals, coins, idealised portraits and castles. The king was thus present constantly in terms of his power significations and outstanding alliance network.⁷

³ Bagge 1999:728.

⁴ Bagge 1999:731.

⁵ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999.

⁶ Bagge 1993:161.

⁷ Monclair 1995, Bagge 1996.

The duty of the king to defeat disloyalty and rebellions may in practice be exemplified by Hákon's conflict with Skuli. As Hákon was only 13 years of age when he was appointed king, Skuli was the real Norwegian governor for some years. With age, Hákon acted more and more independently, and not before long conflict arose between the two. In 1239, Skuli initiated a revolt against Hákon and was appointed king at *Øyratinget* in Nidaros, but the rebellion was put down, and Skuli was killed by the king, already in 1240.

The main source which is interpreted to show the Norwegian king as a supreme judge on God's behalf is the *King's Mirror*, a didactic work probably written in the 1250s at Hákon's court. It is in the form of a dialogue between a father and a son and was probably written for the sons of King Hákon. Even though debatable, it may be suggested that the work advances the idea of *rex justus*, as the quintessential model of Christian medieval kingship and thus, normatively underlines the defining features of the Norwegian king as well. He was to meditate on God's judgement, to attend mass and canonical hours, i.e. to be a loyal Christian. He was also to have a dominion over everything by the grace of God, with the help of the four sisters named Truth, Peace, Justice and Mercy.⁸ Note, however, that even though the *King's Mirror* was written after the example of a European Speculum, Bagge points out that the Norwegian source has its local features and specifications.⁹ Bagge claims also that *Hákons saga* portrays the kingship of Hákon Hákonarson as transformed towards the European *rex justus* model compared to that of his predecessor King Sverre.¹⁰

On a cultural level, there are other enterprises that also testify that king Hákon ruled his court under European influence. The Hákon's Hall in Bergen, built in 1261 for the king's son's wedding, points towards European, and more specifically English impulses.¹¹ The king's castle itself was one of European dimension and pattern, with its covered elevated walkway, connecting the hall to the church, and further to the summer hall. The king's international orientation was also reflected through his friendships and the marriages of his children. He was a great friend of the emperor Fredrick II, son of the German emperor Fredrick Barbarossa¹², and sent falcons as a present to the sultan of Tunisia¹³. The King of Novgorod asked for the hand of King Hákon's daughter, but the latter refused and instead married her to a Castilian

⁸ KM 252.

⁹ Bagge 1987:133-135.

¹⁰ Bagge 1996

¹¹ Helle 1968:109.

¹² HsH ch. 191, 243, 275.

¹³ HsH ch. 313.

prince.¹⁴ On behalf of his son Magnus, King Hákon asked for the hand of the Danish princess.¹⁵

As Iceland is within the article's geographical limits, more must be said concerning the Icelandic historical context. In the 13th century, starting with Snorri Sturluson, one Icelandic chieftain after another was attached to the Norwegian king. By 1250 the king had obtained nearly all *goðorð* and could decide who was to control them. From 1238, and until the end of the Icelandic Free State, all bishops of Iceland were Norwegian, and they actively supported the king's policies. Trade and shipping to and from Iceland was monopolised by Norway as well. The Icelanders were becoming more and more dependent on Norway, economically, politically and religiously. After Iceland became officially a tributary country to Norway in 1262-64, the law book of the Free State, *Grágás*, was replaced by two new law books, *Járnsíða* (1271) and *Jónsbók* (1281), corresponding to the two stages of Magnus Lagabætir's revision of the Norwegian law. This, with successive amendments, became the Icelandic law for the rest of the Middle Ages. In addition, the *goðorð* system was abolished, and administrative officials run by the Norwegian king took their place and functions. The Icelanders' loyalty to the king was given in return for his ensuring peace in Iceland, and hence, the Icelandic aristocracy was transformed into a service aristocracy.¹⁶

The new significance of loyalty towards the king may be related to another two powerful tools employed by the king in his control over his subordinates around the whole Norwegian dominion, namely his unpredictability and presence. First, the essence of the medieval kings' power was the mixture of predictability with unpredictability in his conduct.¹⁷ Second, the king's physical, but also, symbolic presence was another prerequisite for sustaining his dominant and loyalty-demanding position among aristocrats and people.¹⁸ How can these two terms be related to the *riddarasögur*? Through their transmission - presumably mainly because of their entertainment value - the *riddarasögur* may have been unconventional mediators of royal ideology, and in this respect, indicators of his unpredictability. Besides, their very transmission and growing popularity in both Norway and Iceland may be interpreted as royal indirect and symbolic presence, as it was the king who initiated the sagas' distribution in the first place.

¹⁴ HsH ch. 271.

¹⁵ HsH ch. 312-313.

¹⁶ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1989, 1995, 1999; Jón Jóhannesson 1956-58.

¹⁷ Orning 2004:148-149.

¹⁸ Orning 2004:151-52.

Rex Justus or Hieros Gamos?

With this outline of political and cultural history during the reign of Hákon Hákonarson in mind, I wish to return to my departure point, namely, why would the king commission the translations of the *riddarasögur*. If his main aim was to strengthen his image, as a European *rex justus*, a local Norse type of king, or a mixture of these two, it would be convenient if the kings depicted in the sagas were of the same type as well.

Setting the *riddarasögur* in the context of the *rex justus* type of ideology, and thoroughly covering all its aspects, would turn the present article into a whole dissertation, and will therefore not be pursued. I wish, instead, to limit myself to the analysis of only a certain set of royal symbols, both physical and social. The set of symbols that I will use is defined by a cross section of some of the above mentioned Christian-king characteristics and the available information on the theme in the romantic sagas. As the medieval king was considered the worldly mirror of God in Heaven and also God's heir and as the *King's Mirror* emphasises the importance of true belief, I will search my sources for any references to the Christian God and religion, and the latter's relation to the king. Any material symbols of the Christian sacral king, like a high seat, crown, globe, sceptre and ring, a castle or fortress, will also be a relevant royal characteristic in this article. One function of the king which I will especially focus on as well is that of a fair and peace-ensuring judge. Finally, the importance of the king's physical, symbolic or social presence will be studied, by means of his relationships to his knights and domains. These four factors will serve as an analytical tool in this context, despite the fact that such a reduction of complex ideas to a set of elements may divert the attention from alternative, and possibly, more eligible interpretations.¹⁹

A number of scholars have studied the transformation of the royal ideology in Norway, with different temporal frames. The one scholar, whose theoretical standpoint I wish to adopt in this context, is the historian of religion Gro Steinsland. Steinsland is of the opinion that there existed a sacral king ideology during pre-Christian times. Her model will function as the counterpoint for the *rex justus* ideological model in this context. Even though the pre-Christian ideology was different from the Christian, it functioned as a bridge in the process of the cultural and religious changes that occurred in Norway from around year 1030.²⁰

Steinsland's synthesis of the pre-Christian sacral kingship is based upon studies of the Eddaic poem *Skírnismál*, and Snorri's *Ynglingatal*, and *Háleygjatal* and *Hyn-*

¹⁹ Hunt 1990:113.

²⁰ Steinsland 2000:47.

dluljóð.²¹ The first poem retells how Freyr falls in love with the giant girl Gerðr, whom he sees from Óðinn's high-seat. He sends a messenger Skírnir on a dangerous journey to woo her, equipped with an apple, a ring and a stave. She is initially reluctant but after his threats she promises to meet Freyr after nine nights. Snorri then retells that the pair married and had a son called Fíolnir, who was the ancestor of the great Yngling dynasty of Norwegian kings. The king is thus a product of *hieros gamos*, an erotic alliance between two opposing entities, a god who represents order and a giant who represents chaos. The female participation in this creation myth is equally important as the male, in contrast to the Christian creation myth, where God creates man alone. The messenger and the gifts are also essential elements in the myth. The result from the *hieros gamos* is a sacred king, who is neither a god nor a giant, i.e. a creature of a new category, and is often the beginning of a new prominent kin. In the poem *Ynglingatal*, it is further told of the deaths of a number of the Yngling kings, and common for them all is that the ways in which the kings die are deprived of any sense of honour. This has been explained to be a consequence of the king's very nature - as a product of an alliance between order and chaos, the king is on the one hand sacred and privileged, but on the other, pre-destined to an honourless end.

The described myth-complex is also pointed out to exist in a number of medieval historical sources like *Ágrip*, *Historia Norvegiae*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Flateyjarbók*, *Heimskringla*²², *Færinga saga*²³, as well as in archaeological sources like *gullgubber* and runestones²⁴. Scholars have also examined other sources for Steinsland's myth-complex, like, for example, Johan Wickström analysis of *Helgakviða Hjörvarzonar*.²⁵ Steinsland herself has made use of Folke Ström's work on *Hákonardrappa*²⁶ and Lars Lönnroth's work on King Domaldi's death in *Ynglingasaga*²⁷.

It has to be mentioned that Steinsland's theory on the *hieros gamos* myth has been criticized with regard to several of its aspects. Many scholars have pointed out that the origin, existence and death of many kings and princes do not conform to Steinsland's model. Historians, like Henrik Janson²⁸, and archaeologists, like Svante

²¹ Steinsland 1991.

²² Steinsland 2000:135.

²³ Steinsland 2005.

²⁴ Steinsland 2000:74-78.

²⁵ Wickström 2004.

²⁶ Ström 1983.

²⁷ Lönnroth 1986.

²⁸ Janson 1998.

Norr²⁹, doubt also the existence of divine kings in ancient Scandinavia in general. Some also question the connection between the *hieros gamos* and the death motif as well. Anders Hultgård discusses the authenticity of the prose introduction in *Skírnismál*, and the parallel reading of *Skírnismál* and *Ynglingatal*.³⁰ A general source critical discussion is also relevant for Steinsland's model, especially when it comes to the dating of the Eddaic poetry.³¹ The interpretation of the *gullgubber* in light of the *hieros gamos* myth may also be discussed, since many of those objects do not portray a couple (Freyr and Gerðr) but a single figure; besides, the excavation sites are not always easily and convincingly connected with a ruler's dwelling.³² In addition, the poem *Skírnismál* has been interpreted as describing not only the above mentioned *hieros gamos* myth, but also a fertility myth³³ or the tension between marriage, as a political and social contract, and individual feeling in the medieval society³⁴. The topic of marriage in the sagas of chivalry has been studied earlier³⁵, and may be a relevant perspective of relating the sagas to a Christian or non-Christian context, but falls out of the scope of this article. Even though the above arguments weaken Steinsland's hypothesis and myth-complex, all in all, the model has been shown to be enormously important and relevant for studies of royal ideology in the Viking and medieval times. I choose, therefore, to use the *hieros gamos* myth in this article, as the counterpoint for the Christian *rex justus* ideology.

The sources and the method

As already mentioned, the short stories in *Strengleikar* were imported from the French-speaking English court to King Hákon's court in the mid 13th century. The origin of the stories is claimed to be from around 1150-1200. The French manuscript containing most of the *lais* is Harley 978, written down sometime between 1160 and 1180, probably to be presented at the court of Henry II of England³⁶, while the greatest part of the Old Norse versions are to be found in De la Gardie 4-7 – AM 666b 4^o, dating back to around 1270³⁷. The relationship between the two versions is, however, complicated. The prologue and only eleven of the *lais* attributed to Marie de

²⁹ Norr 1998:167.

³⁰ Hultgård 1994.

³¹ Meulengracht-Sørensen 1991, Krag 2001.

³² Steinsland 1990.

³³ Olsen 1909.

³⁴ Lönnroth 1978.

³⁵ Eriksen 2006.

³⁶ Burgess and Busby 1986:14.

³⁷ Tveitane 1972, Cook & Tveitane 1979:xiv-xv.

France are found in Harley 978. Five of the *lais* in *Strengleikar* (Desire, Tidorel, Doun, Leikara lioð, Naboreis) are not found in the Harley manuscript, and thus cannot be attributed to Marie de France, but are possibly part of the same cultural context. Three of the *lais* in De la Gardie 4-7 (Gurun, Strandar Strengleik, Ricar hinn gamli) lack French originals, and besides, the last one is seriously damaged.³⁸ With all the discrepancies between the two main manuscripts, I wish to emphasize that it is the *lais* as presented in the Old Norse manuscript that will be studied here.

Choosing one single source raises a representativity problem. How representative may one source be of the translated *riddarasögur* as a whole genre? The latter problem will persist no matter which saga is analysed, but choosing *Strengleikar* may diminish the gravity of the problem in two ways. The fact that it is explicitly mentioned that King Hákon commissioned the translation, confirms the actual relationship between the source, as a conduct-model, and the factual cultural history at the Norwegian court at the time. Further, since *Strengleikar* is a collection of a dozen short stories, and not solely one story, the source presents a variety of plots to interpret, on the basis of which a more convincing royal ideology may be constructed.

Above, I have presented the two royal ideological models that I will build my analysis upon. Yet, there is another methodological issue that has to be clarified before I start on the analysis, namely the definition of “royal”. The *lais* in *Strengleikar* are stories about kings and knights, and it is often the latter that are the main protagonists in the stories. The kings, as we will see below, tend to manifest themselves more as frame-setters for the whole plot, rather than main protagonists, with some few exceptions. Therefore, in my analysis, I chose to study protagonists defined as kings and knights/ princes/ chieftains, and by royal ideology, I will hereafter, refer to ruler’s ideology (*herskerideology*, *fyrsteideologi*). Studying the ideology of knights and princes, instead of kings, is also more precise considering the historical context of the use of the translated romances in Norway, since the sagas were meant to function as a model of behaviour precisely for the knights and aristocrats of the Norwegian court, and not the king himself.

Yet another subject for debate, regarding my method, originates from the fact that *Strengleikar* is a translated source, and not an original. A comparison of the Old French version of the stories and their Old Norse translations seems, therefore, of essential importance, if we are to know whether the inherent ruler’s ideology is determined by the European cultural context or the Norwegian. Such an investigation is, however, another way to turn an article into a dissertation, and will therefore not be performed in the present context. Comments on the issue will be made on some oc-

³⁸ Cook & Tveitane 1979:xvii.

casions in order to illustrate the relevance of the theme, but these should not be considered as a complete study. The existence of the *Strengleikar* lais is, thus, taken into account from the moment they were introduced to the Norwegian context. I aim to study the ruler's ideology as presented to the Norwegian court members, and whether the ideology was imported or partially locally-born will be irrelevant to my agenda. By choosing not to study the Old French texts, I avoid another potential methodological problem. Some might ask why an Old French text from the 12th century would be searched for any elements of a Norse pre-Christian royal ideological model. Was Marie de France acquainted with the *hieros gamos* myth and why should she want to convey it in her stories? It is obviously difficult to answer this question, but it is equally difficult to answer the question why should Marie de France want to convey the Christian *rex justus* model, for which I will also search her texts. Obviously, she wrote down her stories in a Christian cultural context but as it is stated in her prologue, she recorded stories that had been orally transmitted in order to "perpetuate the memory of [past] adventures"³⁹, and not to explicitly describe her political and cultural context. In other words, I am not attempting to show a clear causal relationship of intention from the author, to the translator, to the commissioner, and lastly to the general audience. What I am doing is attempting to study how *Strengleikar* fitted in the cultural and political context, which we know it was a part of. How was *Strengleikar* possibly understood by those who heard or read it, and why did the stories become so popular? Anyway, if comparison between the Old French and Old Norse versions of the texts were to be performed, a more important issue to consider would have been whether the Norwegian translator might have had the two ideological models in mind. Is it possible to detect whether the translator emphasised or diminished the importance of certain elements of any of the two models, by his choice of words and structure of his translation? This question will not be commented on at this stage, but opens the possibility for further studies.

Else Mundal's discussion on the distinction between the contents of a myth and its form is also highly relevant, when it comes to my approach. Mundal shows that the contents of a myth could stay more or less constant, even if its outer form was changed.⁴⁰ It is namely the contents of the *hieros gamos* myth, as drawn by Steinsland that I will search for, even though its form will be changed from the eddaic poem *Skírnismál* to the romantic lais in *Strengleikar*. Mundal, however, points out that the very genre of a text may present problems for its interpretation. The genre's requirements, when it comes to form and contents, may sometimes be confused with

³⁹ Burgess and Busby 1986:41.

⁴⁰ Mundal 1991.

some of the main elements of a myth.⁴¹ The latter comment is of great importance for the interpretation below, and I will return to it on a number of occasions.

To recapitulate, the aim of this article is to discuss the relationship of the ruler's ideology, as presented in the Old Norse translation of *Strengleikar*, to two different sacral ideologies, the pre-Christian *hieros gamos* model and the Christian *rex justus* ideology. Such a study aims to unveil new aspects regarding two issues: on one hand, the dominant royal ideology in Norway and Iceland, after Iceland became a part of the Norwegian domain, and the Norwegian king might have needed new means to control his geographically spread subordinates; and on the other hand, the complex functions of the *riddarasögur* in the Norwegian domain, as simultaneously providing entertainment, defining a medieval popular culture and serving the king's needs.

Analysis

Already in the Prologue of *Strengleikar* there is a description of a king, for whom the book of *lais* is compiled. The author desired to gather the songs “æinum kurtæisum konungi er guð leðe yvir oss vizku ok valld. gævo ok gnot margfallegs hins frægiazta goðlæiks.”⁴² The king referred to in the French original, has been interpreted as either Henry II of England (ruled 1154-1189), or one of his successors.⁴³ Even though the historical personality of the mentioned king may not be certain, it is positive that he was a Christian king, as he was “God-given” and as he was endowed with, among other things, good fortune. Those are two of the main characteristics of a *rex justus*. Since there is no story that tells about the “end” of the king, there is no room for more discussion at this point. Before I turn to the *lais* themselves, it has to be said that not all stories will be covered in equal detail. The following *lais* do not offer substantial arguments relevant for this article's context and will, therefore, be omitted: *Lai of Eskia*, *Lai of Laustic*, *Chetovel*, *Milun*, *Geitarlauf*, *Lai of the Beach*, *Lai of the Player*, *Naboreis* and *Richard the Old*.

Lai of Guimar – a Christian frame around a pre-Christian core

Lai of Guimar opens with the introduction of King Odels who ruled a kingdom in Brittany. The only features mentioned are that he ruled “stundom i friði oftsamlega i úro ok i ufriði”.⁴⁴ The explicit reference that the king rules in peace does remind of

⁴¹ Mundal 1991:241-242.

⁴² Str 8/9. “in honour of a courteous king whom God gave to us and endowed with wisdom and might, good fortune, and an abundance of manifold and renowned goodness”.

⁴³ Cook and Tveitane 1979:9.

⁴⁴ Str 12/13. “sometimes in peace, often in stress and strife”.

the Norwegian *King's Mirror*, and Peace, one of the four sisters, who assists the king in his function as a ruler and a judge. Thus, from the very beginning, a *rex justus* type of king is discernable. The king may also be said to set the frame for the story, and from that perspective, may be claimed to be “all-present” as a proper Christian king was supposed to be. The story continues with the presentation of a powerful baron and some emphasis is placed on his special relationship to the king, a vassal-like relationship where loyalty to the king is essential. The latter is another of the four adopted elements defining *rex justus* ideology in this article.

As not much more is said of the king on that occasion, I chose to change focus to the main character in the lai, Guimar. The latter was the son of a prominent lord, who served under king Odles. Guimar is described as a chivalrous knight with one peculiar quality though “hann hafnaðe vandlega konom at unna. þui at engi var sua frið ne agæt fru. ne frið mæi at hann villdi sinni ast til snua”.⁴⁵ This description may remind of one of the elements of the pre-Christian ideological model. The explicit reference to a “missing” female element, and its characterisation as *undarlegst*, may call to mind the significance of the female part in the *hieros gamos* model.

Once, while hunting, Guimar hurts a white hind with a branch of an antler in the middle of her head. The arrow then turns back and hits Guimar as well. Before the hind dies, she spells a curse on Guimar that he would survive death only if he is healed by a lady, who “sakar þinnar astar skal bera ok þola sua miklar pinsler hug-sotta ok harma at aldri fyrr bar kuenmaðr þuilika. ok þu þuilik fyrir saker hennar”.⁴⁶ The curse as a story-element reminds of the curse in the myth about the god Freyr and the giantess Gerðr, in the poem *Skírnismál*. In both stories, the curse functions as a constituting element, of vital importance for the final unification of the male and female element in *hieros gamos*. The curse of Guimar also seems to predict his destiny: he will either die because of a missing female element, or will be saved both physically and emotionally by a woman, and reminds, thus, of the pre-Christian model. It has to be mentioned, however, that a Christian interpretation of the unicorn is possible as well. A unicorn has been the subject of a number of allegorical interpretations, the most prominent of which is the union of Christ with the Father.⁴⁷ A more relevant association in this context is the unicorn as symbolising death. The unicorn signifying death can be found in numerous Christian fables, *exempla*, and also in psalm books illuminations, sculptures and paintings, from the mid 11th to the 14th

⁴⁵ Str 12/13. “he completely avoided loving women, for there was no lady so beautiful or excellent, no maiden so beautiful, that he was willing to direct his love towards her”.

⁴⁶ Str 14/15. “out of love for [him], shall bear and endure such great pains, turmoil and torments as no woman ever bore before – and [he] the same for her”.

⁴⁷ Suhr 1964:94.

century, from Byzantium to Western Europe.⁴⁸ The unicorn brings almost death in *Guimar* as well, and a Christian interpretation is therefore plausible.

Guimar sets off on a journey and finally reaches the lady who is to save his life, by means of a magical ship. The ship seems to be made of one single piece of wood, and there are no men on board, but only one splendid bed in the middle. While Guimar rests on the bed, the ship takes him straight to the shore of an ancient city, where his lifesaver resides. There is something peculiar about the ship with its perfect structure, lack of crew and presence of the luxurious bed on board. The ship plays a crucial role in connecting Guimar and his lady several other times, and it seems to “know” the shortest way between the two pre-destined soul-mates. The ship’s strangeness may of course be explained by the fairy tale character of the chivalric sagas. It may, however, also be seen in the context of pre-Christian mythology and culture where the ship was one possible means to get over to the “other” side. Interpreted from that perspective, Guimar’s journey by ship to the coast, where his lady lives, may confirm the lady’s otherness and extraordinariness. The otherness of the female element is, as already mentioned, characteristic for the *hieros gamos* myth, and, thus, strengthens the possibility that *Lai of Guimar* contains elements from the pre-Christian sacral king ideology. The latter may also be emphasised if the bed on the ship is seen as a *gaddi*-like throne. *Gaddi*, an exquisite cotton-stuffed mattress, was considered the symbol of royal qualities in India and served a crucial part in any dynastic enthronement.⁴⁹ Even though some might say that this is a far-fetched comparison, if interpretation as a “royal throne”, the bed on the ship may be compared to Óðinn’s high seat, by means of which Freyr observed Gerðr for the first time. In a similar way, it is by means of the bed on the ship that Guimar survives his physical turmoil and gets to meet his sweetheart. If the bed on the ship is to be interpreted as having a throne-like function, it is feasible to see it in a Christian context as well, as the throne is one of the material symbols of a Christian king.

It has to be said that the pre-Christian sacral king ideology, as synthesised by Steinsland, is not present in its entirety in the *Guimar* story. Not only is the pre-Christian ideology incomplete, but elements further indicating Christian mentality are also present. It is explicitly mentioned that while on the ship and in terrible pain, Guimar “*bað hann þa mioc guð miskunar sér ok sia til sin at veria hann fyrir dauða. ok koma honom til hafnar*”.⁵⁰ Besides, there is a reference to a Christian-like burial

⁴⁸ Aavitsland 2002:174-178.

⁴⁹ Mayer 1985.

⁵⁰ Str 18/19, “prayed hard to God to have pity on him and to look after him, to protect him from death and to bring him to port”.

custom, which is to be performed by a priest.⁵¹ The whole lai is also concluded by an “AMEN”, which proves, however, to be added by the Norwegian translator.⁵² It may, thus, be concluded that *Lai of Guimar* contains a mixture of elements from both the pre-Christian and Christian sacral ruler’s ideology.

Lai of Equitan – A Christian exempla with some pre-Christian elements

Lai of Equitan opens with the presentation of Equitan, the main character. In the Old Norse translation he is accounted for as “Einn ríkr maðr ok herra hœverskr ok kurtæis hofðingi ok ræfsinga stiore”.⁵³ It is, however, pointed out by Cook and Tveitane that in the French version of the lai, Equitan is referred to as *juistise* and *reis*.⁵⁴ Even though the Old Norse translator seems to characterise Equitan as a “director of punishment”, i.e. a judge, he systematically avoids dignifying Equitan with the title of king, until a remark in Latin in the last sentence. In this way the translator lowers the social status of Equitan by his choice of words, and he also de-Christianises him to some extent. The Old French version undoubtedly refers to a Christian *rex justus*, while the Old Norse version brings to mind only one of the manifold functions and characteristics of a *rex justus*, namely his role as an authority to punish. Punishment and especially capital punishment is one of the main themes in the *King’s Mirror*, where it is the king’s right and obligation to punish disloyal subjects.⁵⁵ Why would the translator wish to twist Equitan’s status in such a way? One possible answer is because Equitan does not seem to behave according to the Christian norms, when it comes to his attitude to women. The Old Norse translator may, thus, seem to have purposefully underlined the normative Christian mentality of those who were to read/hear the lai of Equitan. It also seems, by the frequent mentioning of the Lord God, that the general worldview in the lai is of Christian character as well.

The core of the story, though, reminds more of a pre-Christian *hieros gamos* myth, rather than of Christian king ideology. Equitan falls in love with a beautiful lady, and suffers enormously that he cannot have her. His passionate torment echoes of the suffering of Freyr when he could not have Gerðr in the poem *Skírnismál*. Again similar to Freyr, Equitan sends gifts to his beloved in order to win her benevolence. The type of gifts is, however, not mentioned: neither ring, nor staff, nor apples/globe are mentioned. In the beginning, she is reluctant to start a relationship

⁵¹ Str 21.

⁵² Micha 1994:78.

⁵³ Str 66/67. “A powerful man and a courteous lord and well-mannered leader and strict ruler”.

⁵⁴ Str 66-67.

⁵⁵ Vadum 2004:60-64.

with Equitan, and this may once again remind us of *Skirnismál*. Yet, the reason for her reluctance is different from the reason for Gerðr's denial. The lady in *Equitan* is aware that she is of lower social status than the proposing knight. She is, therefore, afraid that Equitan would leave her after a short and frivolous relationship, just to marry someone of his own social status. What is curious is that the lady is actually married, but that fact is not even mentioned as an obstacle for the potential relationship to Equitan. The difference between the male and the female, even though only in social status, may be interpreted to point towards the pre-Christian *hieros gamos* myth. Another argument supporting the same line of thought is the fact that after the initiation of the secret love relationship, the two exchange tokens of love in the form of rings. Even though the ring in itself brings to mind the ring that Freyr sent to Gerðr, the context of the rings-exchange in *Equitan* makes a Christian marriage-ritual more probable as an interpretation.

The narrative summit comes at the end of the story when Equitan and his lover attempt to murder the lady's husband so that they can be together. The French version of the lai has a short final comment that condemns deceit and murder, which is neither extraordinary nor explicitly Christian in its moral. The Old Norse translator, however, chooses to add a much grander, and clearly Christian, conclusion. The end turns the Old Norse translation of *Lai of Equitan* into an *exempla*-like story, the purpose of which is to teach its audience the laws of the Christian God. It may thus be concluded, that the social norms in the society where *Equitan* was to be read are more easily discernable in the story than any consistent sacral king ideology.

Lai of Biscarlet – friendship between a pre-Christian sacred king and a rex justus
In the lais studied so far, we have seen elements of the first phase of the *hieros gamos* myth, namely the meeting between two opposing elements, but none of the second phase, which is the upcoming of the sacral king himself. The *Lai of Biscarlet* may be interpreted to elucidate that second part of the pre-Christian sacral king ideology. Even though Biscarlet is only characterised as a *riddare*, he is the one who may be seen as a kind of sacral king.

Biscarlet, it is explained in the beginning of the lai, was a valiant and courteous knight, but it was his nature to sometimes transform into a werewolf. Having this special nature, Biscarlet could be seen as a creature of a different category, and possibly a sacral king. According to the pre-Christian sacral king mythology, the result from the *hieros gamos* between two opposing elements was exactly such a new-category creature. In *Lai of Biscarlet*, however, nothing is said of the origin, or of the forefathers of Biscarlet. The interpretation of Biscarlet as a sacral king, therefore, may seem somewhat illusive if not supported by other arguments.

Biscarlet's transformation into a werewolf may in itself be seen as a *rites de passage*, which is also characteristic for the existence of the sacral king in pre-Christian Scandinavian religion, even though not included in Steinsland's model.⁵⁶ The werewolf-period may be seen as the liminal phase in the *rites de passage*, when the man Biscarlet is "sacrificed" and is socially dead. This is further supported by the fact that when werewolf, Biscarlet wanders around without his clothes, which may be seen as his human attributes. He needs to put his clothes back on in order to be reborn as a man. The latter operation is also said to be disgraceful for Biscarlet.⁵⁷ Similarly, when in the liminal phase, the sacral king is robbed of his social accessories and becomes socially dead. The liminal phase is also supposed to be demanding and fatiguing for the sacral king, similarly to what was indicated in *Biscarlet*. When the king is reborn, he gets back his attributes and symbols of power. Going through *rites de passage* is part of the destiny of the sacral king, which may sometimes even bring him an honourless death.

This is not the case with Biscarlet, who is actually saved and transforms into his man-shape by the help of his king because of the good relationship and connection between them. For the sake of clarity, the king is only shortly presented in the beginning of the lai, before he turns up for the "saving" of Biscarlet. However, his social presence proves to be essential and conforms to the Christian ideal of an "all-present" king. Besides, it is twice specified that Biscarlet had a good relationship to his king, and it is because of their loyal and favourable connection that the knight is spared. The latter is one of the set characteristics of Christian ruler's ideology. Another direct reference to the Christian religion is in place as well: "þat væit guð ok tru min".⁵⁸ Further, the king functions as a fair, merciful and peace-procuring judge in the story, by both helping and saving the transformed Biscarlet, and by punishing his wife for her behaviour. Such a role strengthens the *rex justus*-like character of the king.

Lai of Biscarlet offers another example, where patterns of the pre-Christian sacral king ideology may be seen. The wife of Biscarlet and her second husband are driven away at the end of the story. It is said "margar konor komo af hænni. ok hænnar afspringi en allar varo afnæfiaðar. ok næflausar".⁵⁹ I will not attempt to explain the possible meaning of the fact that the lady's offspring were all people without noses.

⁵⁶ Sundqvist 2002:27.

⁵⁷ Str 97.

⁵⁸ Str 94/95. "By God and my troth".

⁵⁹ Str 96/97-98/99. "many women descended from her and her offspring, and they were all without noses and noseless".

What I consider more intriguing here is the fact that the female element is essential for the outcome of the offspring, which is one of the most significant features of the pre-Christian sacral king ideology. Thus, it may be concluded that elements from both Christian and pre-Christian ideological models, are to be found in *Lai of Biscarlet*, even though none in a complete form.

Lai of Desiré – Mixed Ideology

Lai of Desiré opens with the story about a couple that desired to have children, but was not successful. One night the lady suggests that they go to a glorious saint in Provence, who by the empowerment of God satisfies the requests of all people who come to him. Her suggestion sounds like a typical Christian pilgrimage. The couple takes the journey to the altar of Saint Giles; they give an offering and pray that the saint grants them with a son or a daughter. When they return home, the lady is already pregnant with a son, whom they name *fysilegr*, or Desiré, since he had long been desired. The whole episode may be interpreted to indicate Christian mentality and belief. Desiré is born because of the blessing of a Christian saint who is empowered by God. His name even reflects part of the story prior to his existence.

Desiré is raised up to be the most handsome and most prominent knight, who is loved by the king as his own son. He is described to be rather extraordinary. Even though no causal relationship is explicitly mentioned between the God-assisted conceiving of Desiré and his extraordinariness, the connection seems implied. On the one hand, this episode may be interpreted as Christian, but it may also be seen from the perspective of the pre-Christian *hieros gamos* myth. The female element may be said to be essential for the birth of Desiré, as it is his mother who suggests that they go on a pilgrimage. Without her, he would not have been born. Note, however, that nothing is mentioned of opposition between the male and female element. Further, Desiré's excellence may be seen as a sign that he was a new-category creature, as is one of the characteristics of a pre-Christian sacral king. It must be said, however, that the description of Desiré's excellence may simply be due to the eloquent character and style of the chivalric stories.

Once, Desiré goes out hunting, and he visits a place called the White Forest. There, by one Yellow Chapel, the knight meets a beautiful lady who becomes his sweetheart. After a short period together, the lady sends Desiré away as "engvm rid-dara samir at fyrirlata frægð sina sacar kvenna asta".⁶⁰ Before they depart, she gives him a ring and bestows him that if he is in any way unfaithful to their relationship,

⁶⁰ Str 116/117. "it is not right that any knight should give up his reputation for the love of women".

the ring may disappear and then he will never be able to get it back. Even though the ring as a symbol of the relationship may remind of the ring that Freyr gives to Gerðr in *Skirnismál*, here it is the female that “binds” the male by the ring. This is an interesting variation on the *hieros gamos* myth, which places an even greater emphasis on the female element, compared to Steinsland’s model.

The ring proves to be symbolic of the otherness of the lady as well. On one occasion, when Desiré meets with one hermit, he chooses to share and confess his out-of-marriage relationship. After the confession, the ring from the lady disappears and the knight suffers immensely because of the loss of his lady, as she has disappeared together with the ring. Since the lady disappears after Desiré confesses, it is reasonable to think that she regards the Christian confession as a betrayal of their relationship. If a Christian ritual is a negatively loaded ritual for the lady, it may be argued that she must be of a non-Christian character. The latter would also qualify her nature as opposite from Desiré’s and would fit well into the *hieros gamos* myth. However, the chapel, the monk and the confession itself are clear and direct references to the Christian religion. Besides, the lady may not be non-Christian, but just critical of confession as a Christian duty in itself. The ring, as well, may be interpreted from a Christian point of view and be seen as a traditional power symbol.

The lady’s reaction to Desiré’s confession may also be explained from a Christian point of view. According to Christian law, all sins have to be confessed sincerely and terminated. Desiré’s confession, therefore, given it is sincere, may be regarded as Desiré’s symbolic denial and closure of their relationship. One of the lady’s comments may further confirm her proper Christian reasoning “*sva ihugar ðu at ec vilia gera þer galldra með uðað. En ei em ec ðesskonar ilsku vetr. þa er þu gengr til kirkiv at biðia fyrir þer. þa skalltu mic sia stannda i hia þer. ok taca vigt brauð með þér*”.⁶¹ Eventually the lady takes him back, because she is convinced that he did not wish to break up with her. But she still wonders about why he confessed in the first place; as none of them was married or betrothed, their relationship was not a sin.⁶² Note, however, that the latter statement disagrees with the Christian norm, which undoubtedly condemns premarital sexual relationships, no matter whether the involved are betrothed or not. Because of that discrepancy with the Christian law, it is in my opinion more convincing to see the episode with the disappearing ring as a part of the pre-Christian myth.

The relationship between Desiré and the lady results in a son and a daughter,

⁶¹ Str 120/121. “You think that I want to cast a wicked spell on you, but I am not that sort of evil creature. When you go to church to pray, you shall find me standing beside you and taking consecrated bread with you”.

⁶² Str 121.

which may be seen as another element of the royal-ideology model. Another time, when Desiré was out hunting with the king, they see a stag, but their attempt to kill him with arrows is in vain, even though the stag seems to be right beside them. Not only do they feel humiliated from their failure to hit the stag, but they also fail to find their arrows, which seem to have mysteriously disappeared. Right after that, a handsome boy appears, with the two arrows in his hand, and he turns out to be Desiré's son. The way and the exact place in the lai where the boy is introduced to the reader/listener are interesting. There may seem to be a connection between the invulnerable stag, the disappearing of the arrows and the appearance of the boy; possibly the boy is meant to be seen as a *hamskiftet* stag. If his parents' relationship may be interpreted as a *hieros gamos*, then the boy should be seen as a sacred king, a creature of a new type and new abilities, in this case, the ability to change form from human to stag. This interpretation may seem rather far-fetched to some. And even if not all are convinced of the boy's ability to change nature, he is still described as handsome, well-formed, fair, clothed in the best materials, large in stature, with curly hair, and an attractive face. All those features indicate the boy's exceptionality as the product of a possible *hieros gamos*. At the end of the story the boy becomes one of the most prominent knights at the king's court, and Desiré's daughter becomes the king's own queen.

I have so far argued that the patterns in *Desiré* may agree well with the pre-Christian sacred king ideology. However, it has been shown that the Christian king ideology may also be detected in the lai, and the latter may be further supported. The general mentality of the characters in the lai seems to be Christian. This is indicated by expressions like "guð þacki þer"⁶³ and "firir gvðs sakar"⁶⁴. Further, one of the episodes presented above takes place on the feast of Pentecost, which is a Christian holiday. In the final scene, the king is presented sitting in his high seat, which may emphasise the king's Christian character. And finally, Desiré and his lady get officially married and live "at gvðs logum...sva at ec þurvi ei skriftagangs ne annarra licna"⁶⁵, which again refers to the Christian faith and customs. As a whole, *Lai of Desiré* has, so far, proven to be one of the most productive stories on elements from both the pre-Christian and Christian ideological models.

⁶³ Str 122/123. "may God reward you".

⁶⁴ Str 124/125. "For God's sake".

⁶⁵ Str 132/133. "according to God's law... in such a way that [they] do not need confession or other forms of mercy".

Tidorel – a pre-Christian sacred king

Tidorel is so far the first lai whose main character is titled a king. It is said that he was the most powerful king in Brittany and the heir to many kings among his forbears. Such a presentation of the king's genealogy reminds of the pre-Christian sacred king ideology, in the sense that the genealogy, or predecessors, of the sacred king in *Skírnismál* is one of the essential elements in the *hieros gamos* myth. Genealogy was, however, also used by Christian monarchs as a means of legitimising one's righteousness to power.

The story begins with introducing the mother of *Tidorel*, who is still childless even though she has been married for ten years. One day, while in the garden with her maidens, the queen falls asleep, and upon awakening she perceives a mysterious handsome knight coming towards her. It turns out that the knight is in love with her, and if she is to know his name and origin, she is bound to follow him. Already at this point in the story, some of the elements of the *hieros gamos* myth are implied. A meeting between a male and a female element is in place and they are to engage in a relationship. What is curious, though, is that it is the male element that is described as the mysterious and the different one; that indicates a swap of the gender roles in the *hieros gamos* motive in *Tidorel*, compared to the traditional myth.

What follows confirms the otherness of the male element. On the way to his domain, the knight leads the lady through a lake. The lake has the reputation that if one swims to the other side of it, a wish of theirs will come true. Not only does the knight manage to get to the other side of the lake, but he also gets there by walking and on the deepest part the water is over his head. Thereafter, he prophetically tells the lady that she will have a son, who will never sleep, and a daughter, whose own two boys will "sleep much better than other people".⁶⁶ The emphasis on various details around sleeping is peculiar and may possibly correlate to the circumstances around the first meeting between the lady and the knight. The lady was sleeping and the first thing she saw after she woke up was the knight; this episode, together with the prophesised characteristics of the knight's children, may be interpreted to indicate that he belongs to a supernatural world, or an "other" world.

The two protagonists' relationship results in a son called *Tidorel*, and he becomes king after the death of the old king. It may be said, based on the *hieros gamos* between his parents, that *Tidorel* is a pre-Christian sacred king. He seems also to be a creature of a new type, since he does not need to sleep as other people. What is interesting, however, is that it is specifically commented that he was baptized, which rocks upon the statement that the king was of pre-Christian character. Another ar-

⁶⁶ Str 140.

gument against the existence of the *hieros gamos* myth in this lai is that the myth is not complete. Information on any ring, globe, staff or high seat is lacking, and so is the initial reluctance of the female element to proceed towards the *hieros gamos*.

Despite those missing parts of the pre-Christian myth, *Tidorel* offers information on the death of the sacred king, which is an essential feature of the sacred king's character. It seems that even though Tidorel is a prosperous and popular king, the fact that he is the product of the unification between two opposing elements also brings some disadvantages and "bad luck". It is actually when Tidorel finds out that he is the son of a mystical knight who comes from a mystical lake, that he "[rides] away into the lake...and never [returns]".⁶⁷ It is not said that he dies, but that he simply goes to his father's domain. As already mentioned, the latter is obviously not a realistic, but an "other" world.

To conclude, it may be said that the pre-Christian sacred king ideology is convincingly inherent in *Tidorel*. Almost all elements of the myth are present, although with some modification: the unification between opposite elements, focus on the different element, which in this case is the male, the special nature of the sacred king, and the latter's destiny and death.

Doun – hieros gamos between different elements

Lai of Doun opens with the presentation of an "æin mæ...hin friðazta ok hin kurteisazta"⁶⁸, who, as her patrimony, rules over the whole of Scotland. Because of her extreme splendour, she becomes conceited and proud and is reluctant to engage in a relationship with any man, as none is worthy enough. Already in these first few lines, a number of *hieros gamos* elements may be discerned: introduction of a female character, situated in her father's dominion, similarly to Gerðr in the land of giants, in *Skírnismál*. Besides, the emphasis on the lady's beauty creates certain expectations regarding a romantic/ erotic involvement of the story. Last, the lady's reluctance to start a relationship is present and an essential element of the pre-Christian *hieros gamos* myth.

Further, the lady claims that the one who is to have her has to perform a straining riding journey – namely, to pass the distance from Southampton to Edinburgh in one day on horseback. The latter detail reminds of the treacherous journey that the messenger of Freyr had to endure on his way to the land of giants to fetch Gerðr. And as might be expected, the main protagonist, the knight Doun from Normandy, upon hearing of the pretentious lady, takes her challenge and accomplishes the riding suc-

⁶⁷ Str 141.

⁶⁸ Str 150/151. "exceptionally beautiful and courteous lady".

cessfully. The fact that the knight comes from Normandy may be interpreted to suggest a certain difference/otherness between the male and the female character, in terms of geographical separation of their realms. But even though Doun passes the lady's trial, she is still reluctant to marry him and sets yet another challenge to him – yet another riding journey. He manages that journey as well, and finally the two are married and he becomes the lord of all her kingdom. The fact that he obtains her kingdom, together with her, may remind of Steinsland's interpretation of *Hákonardrápa*, where the *hieros gamos* is seen as the king's taking over the ownership of land.⁶⁹

The marriage between Doun and the lady results in a son, which is yet another element of the *hieros gamos* myth in the lai. Before leaving for his homeland, Doun leaves a ring which is to be passed to his son. The ring in this case, however, does not quite conform to the *hieros gamos* tradition, where it is a gift from the male to the female element, together with an apple and a staff. It functions better in a Christian-mentality frame, namely to symbolise a king's power and authority, which is passed from generation to generation. Another reference to the Christian religion in the lai is a Christian place name, Mont St. Michel.⁷⁰

Not only is a son born, but he also grows to be exceptional, in the respect that “engi stozc honum i vapnum”.⁷¹ The latter may suggest that the boy was of a new category, i.e. a proper sacred king, but it may also simply be due to the characteristics of the chivalric literature genre. So far, *Lai of Doun* has offered convincing material for reading of the *hieros gamos* pre-Christian myth in the story. The only element of the myth which is not referred to seems to be the sacred king's destiny or bad luck. The story ends happily, with the meeting of the father and the son in a battle. Doun recognises his son by means of the ring, and finally, they both travel back to Scotland to live harmoniously with their wife and mother for many years.

As a conclusion, it might be said that *Lai of Doun* is a rather productive story on elements of the pre-Christian sacred king ideology. A coherent Christian royal ideology is hard to build upon only two references, the ring and the Christian place name.

Gurun – a pre-Christian sacred king within a Christian world-frame

Lai of Gurun may be interpreted to contain elements from the *hieros gamos* myth in two ways. The lai opens with a presentation of the ancestors of the knight Gurun. It

⁶⁹ Steinsland 1991:123-124.

⁷⁰ Str 155.

⁷¹ Str 154/155. “nobody [is] his match with weapons”.

is said that “Gurun var ættaðr af brettlande dyrlegr maðr oc ríkra manna”,⁷² and that “Scota konungr var [his mother’s] bróðr”.⁷³ Both parents are thus presented to be of prominent families and, besides, may be interpreted to be different, since one is from *Brettlande*, and the other from Scotland. Cook and Tveitane point out that Norse *Bretland* can refer to either Brittany or Great Britain⁷⁴. Both of those geographical areas are clearly distinguished from Scotland. In the same way, *Skírnismál*’s protagonists Freyr and Gerðr come from their own distinguished families, which are separated spatially from one another. No more is said of the circumstances around their marriage, but simply that the knight Gurun is their offspring. Despite this “missing link”, a *hieros gamos* structure may be discerned in the lai, if Gurun proves to be the sacred king, by means of his extraordinary qualities or somewhat unfortunate destiny. And so it happens at the end of the story, that Gurun is badly wounded in a battle. He would not have been in that battle if he were not the son of his parents, since he fought for his mother’s brother. This may be seen as the unlucky destiny of the sacred king. Fortunately, Gurun survives his deadly wound and later becomes “hinn bazi riddare. harðr i vapnum. Oflogr ok sterkr ok vaskr sva at vm hans daga fannz ei hans maki”.⁷⁵ This citation evidences the sacred king’s extraordinariness and unprecedented excellence.

As mentioned above, *Lai of Gurun* may be interpreted to reveal other elements from the *hieros gamos* myth, if studied from a different perspective. The lai also retells of Gurun’s relationship to a lady. In this respect, Gurun may be seen in the role of Freyr, and the lady as Gerðr. Gurun sends a messenger who is to fetch his sweetheart. On his way, the messenger encounters obstacles, and also presents gifts in order to win the lady’s willingness. All those elements remind of *Skírnismál*: the messenger Skírnir, his hardship on the way and his gifts to Gerðr. My argument may, however, be weakened by the fact that both the obstacles and the gifts are of different character in *Lai of Gurun* compared to the Eddaic poem. However, the erotic meeting between the two is explicitly accounted for, and creates clear parallels to the *hieros gamos* myth. Yet another weakness in my argument is presented by the lack of any reference to a result from the erotic meeting. The only result of the love between Gurun and the lady is the existence of the lai itself.

⁷² Str 170/171. “Gurun’s family was British; he was a noble man and came from a distinguished line”.

⁷³ Str 170/171. “The king of the Scots was her brother”.

⁷⁴ Str 171.

⁷⁵ Str 180/181. “the best of knights, bold at arms, powerful and strong and valiant, so that in his time he had no equal”.

The lai contains some references to Christian mentality as well. A dwarf in the story says “Eigi em ec vandr maðr ec em kvað hann gvðs skepna”.⁷⁶ It is also said on one occasion that the queen goes to church. Besides, in the beginning of the lai it is mentioned that Gurun is sent to the king of the Scots, his mother’s brother, and that “konungr toc vel uið honum. ok tignaðe hann yuir alla. ok gerðe hann sér hinn kærasta”.⁷⁷ Such a relationship between the king and the knight may be classified as a vassal- or foster-like, and is characteristic of the Christian medieval kingship. Gurun’s loyalty to the king later pays off as he is made the earl of the Welsh people. Such loyalty and favourable relationship to the king was one of the initially set elements for a Christian royal ideology. The described network of friendships may also be seen as the frame and the necessary starting point of the whole plot. The king, therefore, may once again be interpreted as the all-present Christian king, from a social point of view. The king in the lai is also characterised with certain qualities and material symbols, like for example “ricr konungr. mioc hyggen ok kurteiss”⁷⁸; he owns substantial lands that could be given away to his vassals to steer; he may dub his knights and is also in charge of a group of retainers, that could be mobilised in case of war.⁷⁹ All those material symbols may be interpreted as pointing towards a traditional Christian medieval kingship. Note, however, that the described qualities may also be simply due to the genre. Once again, it may be concluded that a mixture of pre-Christian and Christian royal ideology seems to be inherent in the lai.

Janual – the Arthurian knight and the different female element

Lai of Janual opens in a Christian setting, as we are at the court of King Arthur, who we know was a Christian king, during the time of Pentecost, which is a Christian holiday. It is explicitly said that the king has a retinue and that he is very generous in giving gifts to all his knights. Those details may be interpreted as indicating the material might of a powerful Christian king. One of Arthur’s knights is Janual, who is presented in the very beginning and is the main protagonist in the rest of the lai. The king, therefore, functions again as a somewhat distant, but always present, definer of the social context, as a proper medieval Christian king was supposed to be.

On a special occasion, Janual meets and falls in love with a beautiful lady. The occasion is special, as it has something to do with Janual’s relationship to King

⁷⁶ Str 174/175. “I am not an evil man. I am a creature of God”.

⁷⁷ Str 170/171. “the king gave him a good reception and honoured him above everybody and made him his favourite”.

⁷⁸ Str 170/171. “a powerful king, very wise and courteous”.

⁷⁹ Str 176.

Arthur. Such a co-relationship to the king may be interpreted from a pre-Christian ideological point of view as well, and may remind of *Skirnismál*, where Freyr gets to see and fall for Gerðr as a causal result from his positioning in relation to the “king” Óðinn. Further, a messenger and a gift are involved as well, but both are sent from the lady to the knight, just like in *Lai of Milun*. Besides, the messengers are not one, but two and the gift is “endless supply of money”, and not ring, apple and staff. The erotic consummation of their love takes place, and thus another element of the *hieros gamos* myth is in place.

So far, no comment is made concerning the difference between Janual and the lady, which is an essential element of the *hieros gamos* myth. The evolvment of the lai’s plot, however, does convey a major difference which reminds of *Lai of Desiré*. What happens is that the lady asks Janual to keep their relationship secret and tells him that he simply needs to think of her and she will be there. In this way, the two continue their affair until the moment when Janual, pressed by the circumstances, reveals their story. From that instant on, the lady does not come to him as she had done earlier, and Janual is broken by sorrow and grief. Such behaviour is mysterious and classifies the lady as being of peculiar nature, distinct from that of Janual. The supreme qualities of the lady are accounted for explicitly later:

...En I þui kom riðande um enndilanagn b[/oe/en] ein sva frið mær a sva goðum hesti. at i ollum heiminvm var engi henni iamfrið. ne hesti hennar annar iamgoðr. hann var huitr sem snior. Sua var hann hogværr gangare skiotr ok vaskr ok einkennilegr yuir allum dauðlegum hestum. at engi hafðe set þuilican...⁸⁰

Thus, another basic component of the *hieros gamos* myth is exposed. Regardless of that, the myth does not prove to be complete in this lai either. Nothing is mentioned of a result after the couple’s *hieros gamos*, and the relationship may simply be seen as a typical story of the chivalric genre.

As in some of the lais analysed above, there is a number of references to a dominant Christian worldview in the sagas. Both Pentecost⁸¹ and St. John’s Eve⁸² are

⁸⁰ Str 224/225. “at this moment there came riding through the length of the town a maiden so beautiful, on such a good horse, that in all the world there was not her equal. Nor was there another horse as good as hers; it was as white as snow, and it was such a gentle ambler, swift and valiant and unique above all mortal horses, that no one had seen its like”.

⁸¹ Str 213.

⁸² Str 215.

mentioned as holidays celebrated by the lai's protagonists. Besides, on one occasion the expression "ef guði licar"⁸³ is present. Even if colloquially uttered, the phrase points towards the fact that Christianity was the dominant belief-system. Loyalty to the king seems to be important as well as "margir varo þeir er at lica konungi ok drottning villdu spilla hans lut".⁸⁴ The lai also gives specific evidence that disloyalty and disrespect to the king is to be punished, by setting the offender on a trial in front of the whole of the king's retinue. The king, thus appears as a supreme judge, i.e. a proper *rex justus*. He also turns out to be kind, fair and interested in a peaceful solution, as the offender is set free when proven innocent. Those qualities were specifically mentioned in the *King's Mirror* as essential to a Christian *rex justus*.

To conclude, it might be said that even in a clearly Christian context, the lai conveys some pieces from the *hieros gamos* myth, but the pre-Christian royal king ideology does not appear in its entirety. An interesting mixture of pre-Christian and Christian ideological elements is once again at stake.

Jonet – a reversed hieros gamos and its Christian outcome

The present lai is a story about a secret relationship between a lady and a knight. Without going into details, I wish to mention that both the male and the female character are of equal significance for the story, but their roles in regard to the original symbolism of male order and female chaos are reversed. It is the male protagonist in *Jonet* who is of peculiar nature – he is, namely, a goshawk who turns into a handsome and great knight when with the lady.⁸⁵ It is also suggested that the bird-knight comes from a different country than the lady by his comment: "ei mætti ec til þin koma or fostr lande minv. nema þu hefðer beðit mec".⁸⁶ Later in the story the latter guess is confirmed. Not only does he live in a different country geographically, but possibly also cosmologically. It is described that to get to his city of light, one passes through a pitch-dark cave, and a straight line through the cave takes one out of the cave and down to where there are beautiful fields and grassy meadows.⁸⁷ The chaotic element, in this case the male, comes from a territory below that of the female order, which conforms to the spatial situation of chaos vs. order in pre-Christian mythology.

⁸³ Str 224/225. "if it pleases God".

⁸⁴ Str 220/221. "there are many who, in order to please the king and queen, were willing to decide against [Janual]".

⁸⁵ Str 233.

⁸⁶ Str 232/233. "I could not have come to you from my native country if you had not asked for me".

⁸⁷ Str 239.

The *hieros gamos* elements of a messenger, who is sent to fetch the lover, and an initial reluctance, may also be read in the lai. The lady lives in very miserable circumstances, locked in a tower by her jealous and old husband, and one day she prays to God to grant her a beautiful knight with whom she may be happy: “Gvð er hvetvitna gerir geui mer vilia minn”.⁸⁸ The interpretation of this prayer as being an equivalent to the messenger Skirnir is, naturally, highly tentative; especially, having in mind that a Christian prayer is attempted transformed into an element of a pre-Christian myth. However, the lady’s true belief in the Christian God is weakened by the very nature of her request, since she prays that God brings her a lover even though she is married. Such a prayer can hardly be characterised as sincerely Christian. Moreover, it is a fact that one of the protagonists “fetches” the other, by means of purposeful asking for him, just like in *Skírnismál*, as elucidated in the citation above. There also seems to be certain and unexplainable reluctance from the knight’s side, at first, to indulge in the *hieros gamos*: “en ei villdi hann hondum á henni taca. ok ei kyssa hana ne halsfaðma”.⁸⁹ What makes him change his mind is not, however, any gift and is difficult to explain from a pre-Christian ideological point of view. A priest is summoned who brings the holy Eucharist to him, and first thereafter can the lady lay with her sweetheart: “fruin la þa i hia unnasta sinum ok biuggu þau með miclum fagnaðe”.⁹⁰ As argued for above, the function of the Christian ceremony of receiving the Eucharist appears rather unconvincing, since it is employed to “bless” an adultery, which is otherwise condemned by Christian law.

Another element of the pre-Christian *hieros gamos* myth present in the lai is the conceiving of a child during the *hieros gamos*, “vaskan mann ok raustan”.⁹¹ But whether he may be characterised as a sacred king, is of course debatable. Nothing is mentioned of his unfortunate death, but it seems that he has a destiny with his life, namely to revenge his parents’ tragic relationship and end.⁹²

Above it was mentioned that no gifts were exchanged when the two sweethearts met for the first time. The knight presents gifts to the lady at their last meeting, however, before he is to die. The gifts are a ring, a sword and a precious tunic. The ring is to protect the lady from her jealous husband, and the sword is to be passed on to their son, as a proof of paternity. If the sword is interpreted as a kind of a staff, *Lai of Jonet* contains two of the three presents given to Gerðr by Freyr in *Skírnismál*.

⁸⁸ Str 232/233. “May God who performs everything give me my wish”.

⁸⁹ Str 234/235. “but he did not want to touch her with is hands, nor kiss or embrace her”.

⁹⁰ Str 234/235. “the lady then lay with her sweetheart, and they stayed there in great delight”.

⁹¹ Str 238/239. “who will be a valiant and strong man” .

⁹² Str 243.

As already done in a couple of analyses above, I would like to study the lai's protagonists, and especially the bird-knight, from a different point of view. Could he be seen as a pre-Christian sacred king? After his death, he is referred to as "hinn vaskasti ok hinn villdasti hinn friðasti ok hinn harðasti i vápnvm hinn virðulegste ok hin vinsælazti. er i heiminn hevær komit".⁹³ Besides those exceptional qualities, which can easily be explained by the genre of the text, the knight can also be characterised as a creature of an extraordinary category, on the basis of his ability to change form from a bird to a man. Such a transformation calls to mind a *hamskipti*-process, which is traditional for a sacred king. Further, he is obviously doomed to an unfortunate death, due to exactly his ability to change form. Nothing is however said of, for example, the special luck he might bring to his people, which would have been expected from a sacred king. Another argument against the interpretation of the knight as a pre-Christian sacred king is that he is explicitly said to be buried at a monastery, in "ett mikit leg er hult var gollvofno pelli. er hvelgort var. ok allt gyllovnm saumat".⁹⁴ Therefore, it is more convincing to characterise the knight as a proper Christian king.

Other multiple references to the Christian belief and worldview are present in the lai as well. The receiving of the Eucharist and the existence of a monastery is already mentioned. And here follow some more citations: "ec fæ ei frælsi til kirkiu at ganga. Ne helgar tiðir heyra"⁹⁵; "Ec trui vel a skapara allrar skepnu er frialsaðe oss or helvitis pinslum. Er adamr hinn fyrsti faðer var i batt oss. er af þui bannaðo tré át er gvð firir bauð honum."⁹⁶ etc. The holiday of St. Aaron is another reference to the Christian religion. The hero's extensive dominion is also explicitly described, a city, with houses and halls and towers, with hunting-forests and more than 400 ships docked at the river, which may be seen as symbols of the material power of a Christian king.

As a sum-up, I would qualify *Lai of Jonet* as a text that may be interpreted from the point of view of both pre-Christian and Christian sacred king ideology. The lai functions very well as the ultimate text to be analysed in detail with its numerous and various possible interpretations.

⁹³ Str 244/245. "the most valiant and excellent, the handsomest and the hardiest with weapons, the most worthy and well-liked man who has ever come into the world".

⁹⁴ Str 244/245. "large tomb which was covered with a gold-embroidered cloth, decorated with circular figures and all sewn with fine gold".

⁹⁵ Str 230/231. "I don't have the liberty to go to church or listen to holy services".

⁹⁶ Str 232/233- 234/235. "I believe fully in the Creator of all creation who freed us from the tortures of hell to which Adam bound us, our first father, who ate from the forbidden tree which God prohibited him".

Conclusion

Summary of the Empirical Results: New Ideological Model

The aim of the empirical analysis was to investigate *Strengleikar* for traces of a number of elements from two royal ideologies – the pre-Christian *hieros gamos* myth-complex, as defined by Gro Steinsland, and a Christian *rex justus* royal ideology. Before I go on with the interpretation of the empirical evidence, I wish to shortly sum up the analysis above.

The lais in *Strengleikar* presented numerous references to the elements set to constitute Christian royal ideology. The king's physical, symbolic or social presence was often at stake. The king was frequently introduced as the territorial governor of the region where the plot evolved, and in this respect, as a circumstance without which the story would not have had the same outcome. Good relationship to the king, in terms of friendship or loyalty, was another essential departure point for the protagonist's destiny. Furthermore, there exist abundant references to the Christian God and religion in the lais. Various Christian holidays were mentioned, like Pentecost or various saint days; the protagonists frequently appealed to God, and the lais were sometimes concluded by an AMEN. As already mentioned, the Old Norse versions of the lais often contain more references to the Christian religion added by the Old Norse translator, either in the form of expressions/ formulas or moral lessons. The one set characteristic of Christian royal ideology, which has been least evident, is the material symbols of the king. On a number of occasions, a ring or a sword passed from father to son, were interpreted as a symbol of royal authority. But in general, few material symbols of the ruler's power were mentioned. However, the power symbols in this article's context were chosen in order to correspond to the power symbols existent in the pre-Christian *hieros gamos* myth-complex. Other power symbols, like for example castles, towns, arrangement of generous feasts or availability of a *hirð*, were sometimes present, and may also be interpreted as pointing towards a Christian kingship. Finally, the kings in the lais were sometimes described as kind and fair judges, which was the last of the set main elements of the *rex justus* ideology.

Seen from a pre-Christian point of view, on the other hand, the lais of *Strengleikar* presented all elements of Steinsland's *hieros gamos* myth complex. We have read about equally significant female and male parts in relationships. The difference between them was often present as well, even though it was sometimes expressed purely geographically or socially, and not cosmologically, as in *Skírnismál*. Furthermore, on a couple of occasions, it was the male part that was the different one, un-

like what is the case in *Skírnismál*. In order for the two to meet, a difficult journey had to be taken in several of the lais, which parallels to Skírnir's journey. However, in *Strengleikar*, it was not always the messenger of the male part who took the trip, but the latter himself. Besides, the presence and function of the gifts in the lais did not always correspond to those in Steinsland's myth complex. The ring was the most frequently occurring gift, a staff-like sword is accounted for once, and the apple was not present at all. The *hieros gamos*, in terms of being a sexual alliance, was often accounted for; however, this may also be seen as purely due to the specific characteristics of the studied genre itself. Further, the result of the *hieros gamos* was often a creature of a new category. The degree of this novelty of character of the sacred king varied however, from being simply expressed by means of his exceptionality as a knight, which is very typical of the chivalric sagas as a genre, to being interpreted on bases of his ability to change form. The hero's outcome was also often predestined and due specifically to his origins.

What weakens the probability of existence of the pre-Christian myth in the studied texts is the fact that the whole myth-complex can not be traced in one single lai. Some of the myth's elements are found in some lais, and other elements in other texts. It is, however, very probable that the lais were transmitted to an audience collectively, and not one by one. In this respect, they formed a natural coherent entity in time and space, by means of transmission and reception, but also by means of the manuscript they are found in today. It must be mentioned that the *hieros gamos* myth itself was constructed on basis of several sources. This does support my approach of analysis, but it has also been the target for most severe critique of Steinsland's model.

All in all, the empirical analysis above shows that *Strengleikar* may be interpreted from the perspective of both royal ideological models, despite the fact that some arguments may be forwarded against both lines of reasoning. What may this conclusion tell us of the cultural, historical, or mental context of distribution of the lais, i.e. Hákon Hákonarson's court and the Old Norse society? Maybe it is possible to argue that the predominant royal ideology at the court of Hákon Hákonarson encompassed a mixture of old pre-Christian elements and new Christian *rex justus* elements? Thus, a new syncretised type of ideological model may evolve, on the grounds of the empirical results of the analysis of *Strengleikar*.

The riddarasögur as royally promoted popular culture of the 13th century

How may we interpret the existence of elements of pre-Christian myth in Christian literature, then? How may the pre-Christian traits have functioned in their Christian social context? Other scholars have posed a similar question as well, and have given various solutions. The philologist Annette Lassen draws the attention to the fact that

Óðinn appears in a number of sagas, which were written in a Christian context, among others *Hervara saga Heiðriks*, *Völsunga saga*, and *Egils saga*.⁹⁷ She also points out that some of these sagas were written down not long after Snorri wrote his *Edda*, and the writing down of the *Codex Regius*, which are considered as the two main sources of the pre-Christian myths. Lassen interprets this to indicate that the sagas should be studied as part of the corpus of medieval texts, written in a Christian context, which convey pre-Christian myths, seen through the eyes of their Christian authors, with all their intentions and prejudices regarding the pre-Christian past.⁹⁸

The archaeologist Gunnar Nordanskog, on the other hand, discusses the notion of pre-Christian and Christian motifs in Scandinavian church art.⁹⁹ He studies various art works, which have been claimed to contain pre-Christian images or symbolise pre-Christian ideas, like iron mounted church doors from present-day Sweden, Norwegian stave church portals with motifs from Sigurðr Fafnesbani poetry, and Romanesque stone sculptures reminiscent of animal styles from the Viking age. Nordanskog suggests that what has been viewed as pre-Christian in earlier research should rather be understood as interest in the local past during the Middle Ages.¹⁰⁰ He emphasises the importance of the commissioner, and points out that the studied artefacts should be understood as carriers of an indigenous culture with pre-Christian roots, bringing the importance of the past in the Christian present context.¹⁰¹

Similarly, any further interpretation of the empirical results from the analysis of *Strengleikar*, rests on two premises: first, that the *hieros gamos* myth was still known at the time of translation and transmission of *Strengleikar* at the court of King Hákon; and secondly, that people would have consciously recognised the model's elements in various stories, in a similar way as I have reconstructed it in the analysis. These two premises' are difficult to validate but some arguments may be forwarded in their favour.

The heathen religion, with its myths and Gods, was obviously known at least to some parts of the Scandinavian elite in the 13th century. This statement is based on the approximate dating of the writing down of the eddaic poetry, which was the main primary source of the pre-Christian religion. *Codex Regius*, the manuscript that contains the majority of the poems, is dated to the later part of the 13th century.¹⁰² Even though the dating, especially of the origin, of the eddaic poems is a highly contro-

⁹⁷ Lassen 2003.

⁹⁸ Lassen 2003:216.

⁹⁹ Nordanskog 2006.

¹⁰⁰ Nordanskog 1996:365.

¹⁰¹ Nordanskog 1996:372.

¹⁰² Jónas Kristjánsson 1997:26.

versial matter, the latter does not relate to or hinder my argumentation in any way, since I am interested in the latest possible date of knowledge of the Old Norse myths.

Scaldic poetry, which is mainly concerned with recent events and praise of kings, may be seen as another primary source to the pre-Christian myths for two reasons. Firstly, some poems distinguish themselves by means of their mythological narrative, like for example *Ragnarsdrápa* and *Haustrlång*. Secondly, the special skaldic diction of *heiti* and *kennings* does also sometimes refer to heathen gods and mythological events. No manuscript of skaldic poetry is preserved, but individual stanzas are known from various prose writings. Snorri, for example, included many whole or partial stanzas in his *Edda*, which may therefore be regarded as a secondary source to the pre-Christian myths. Snorri wrote his *Edda* about 1220, and the *Heimskringla*, which retells of pre-Christian and Christian Norwegian kings, in the 1230's.¹⁰³

Thus, it may be concluded that knowledge of the pre-Christian myths was existent among the Icelandic cultural elite during the 13th century. Is it reasonable to deduce that the Norwegian cultural elite was acquainted with the old myths in a similar way? I dare answer confirmatively, since Snorri and other scalds had close connections to and worked for the Norwegian king and his court society in the 13th century.

What we have then is a Christian aristocratic circle which was still aware of their past, in terms of religious and ideological models. A new type of literature, which seems to combine the old and new cosmological orders, was introduced to this circle of people by the king. The hypothesis that the king introduced the sagas in order to legitimise himself as a proper European, Christian monarch, i.e. a *rex justus*, has thus to be slightly adjusted, since the kings in the sagas seem to follow a different royal ideology: namely a combination of the old pre-Christian *hieros gamos* myth and the *rex justus* ideology. The king's commission of the translations of these *rid-darasögur* may, thus, be seen as an interest in the kingdom's past, and as one of the many renaissances of past ideas and motifs in the Middle Ages. From reception point of view, the pointed out characteristics of the content of the texts and the sagas' popularity in Norway and Iceland may point towards something else: namely, the possible existence of popular culture in Norway and Iceland in 13th and 14th century, which unified some pre-Christian ideas, like for example the *hieros gamos* myth, with Christian royal ideology. This popular culture may have been the reason that the sagas became so popular, since the audience would have recognised the ideological models in them. As mentioned in the beginning, it would be interesting to study whether the Old Norse translations of the sagas may be said to have been consciously

¹⁰³ Jónas Kristjánsson 1997:25-26.

adapted to the specific popular culture of the audience, by means of the translator's method of transferring/ rewriting the text from Old French to Old Norse.

On a theoretical level, it has been argued by many that in the Middle Ages, there existed two cultures side by side, a "learned" one and a "folkloric" one.¹⁰⁴ Empirical studies have also been carried out on the subject, like for example Karen Louise Jolly's work on elf charms in Late Saxon England.¹⁰⁵ The Icelandic sagas have also been discussed from that perspective – was their content and style influenced by Latin European "learned" cultural traditions, or were the sagas more representative of the secular "folkloric" Nordic culture.¹⁰⁶

The *riddarasögur* may have been a group of sources/stories that appealed to the general public because of the latter's popular culture-background, and because of the highly entertaining qualities of the texts. This argument may be supported by the generally accepted fact that the European literature, and the indigenous literature inspired by the European romances, gradually became a part of the oral and folk-culture in Iceland. If this line of thought is taken a step further, an interesting suggestion may be made, namely that there existed "popular culture" mentality not only among the general public, but also at the king's court. The latter is, however, a mere speculation at this point, but could prove an engaging theme for further research of not only *riddarasögur*, but also other genres of literature. Due to the inherent political message in the sagas on one hand, and their appeal to the popular mentality of the audience on the other, the *riddarasögur* may have functioned as the perfect tool of royal propaganda for a king who needed to master a politically new, and geographically larger, domain.

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¹⁰⁴ Schmitt 1988:380, Engen 1986:519.

¹⁰⁵ Jolly 1996.

¹⁰⁶ Lönnroth 1965

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Sammendrag

Denne artikkelen tar for seg emnet konge- eller herskerideologi i *Strengleikar*, en samling av fortellinger som ble skrevet av Marie de France på 11-hundretallet, og som ble oversatt fra gammelfransk til gammelnorsk på 12-hundretallet. Det var kong Håkon Håkonsson som bestilte oversettelsene av *Strengleikar*, og andre riddersagaer, som *Ívens saga*, *Tristrams saga*, *Möttuls saga* og *Elis saga*. Et mye diskutert spørsmål i forskningen har vært hvorfor kongen bestilte disse oversettelsene. En hypotese, som også er utgangspunktet for denne artikkelen, er at kongen introduserte Europeisk litteratur til sitt hoff for å kunne fremstå som en ordentlig europeisk monark av typen *rex justus*. Tekstene kunne ha fungert på denne måten om kongene i fortellingene var av typen *rex justus*. Derfor er det på sin plass å undersøke kongeideologien iboende i disse kildene.

For å ha en motvekt til *rex justus* modellen, introduserer jeg i tillegg en førkristen kongeideologi modell – *hieros gamos* modellen. Religionshistorikeren Gro Steinland hevder at det var selve forestillingen om den hellige kongen som utgjorde en bro og førte til kontinuitet på mentalitets nivå mellom hedendommen og kristendommen. Den hellige kongen er sentral i både *hieros gamos* og *rex justus* modellen.

Analysen av *Strengleikar* viser at kongeideologien iboende i tekstene er i mindre grad en ren kristen *rex justus* ideologi, men snarere en blanding av de to foreslåtte modellene. Hvordan kan dette forklares og hva sier dette om den kulturelle konteksten av kong Håkons hoff?

Et nyttig begrep for å forklare disse funnene kan være *popular culture*- begrepet. Flere forskere har foreslått at det i middelalderen fantes to kulturer som eksisterte parallelt i samfunnet - en kristen lærd kultur og en folkelig kultur, som forente elementer fra førkristen og kristen mentalitet. Sett fra dette perspektivet kan *Strengleikar* tenkes å ha appellert til sitt publikum på grunn av den blandede kongeideologien i fortellingene.

Tekstene kan da ses på som kilde for den folkelige mentaliteten i middelalder-Norge.

Videre argumenterer jeg for at kongen kan ha bestilt oversettelsen av *Strengleikar* og andre riddersagaer ikke bare for å appellere til sitt eget hoff, men også til det generelle publikumet i både Norge og Island, som ble en del av Norges kongedømme i løpet av 12-hundretallet. Det er allment kjent at riddersagaene ble veldig populære på Island, inspirerte produksjonen av nye lokale riddersagaer, og førte til utbredelsen av disse historiene blant et sosialt bredere publikum. Med sin spesifikke kongeideologi kan riddersagaene, som eksemplifisert av *Strengleikar*, tolkes på to måter. På den ene siden, *hieros gamos* myten kan anses som en førkristen forestilling som kan ha vært et gjenlevende element i den folkelige kulturen i Norge og Island på 12- og 13-hundretallet. På den andre siden, på grunn av deres kongeideologi som appellerte til et bredt sosialt publikum, kan riddersagaene ha fungert som et kulturelt kongelig initiativ som kan ha styrket hans posisjon i en ny politisk situasjon og et geografisk større kongedømme.

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